

## **Negotiating masculinities and learning to 'be a man' at school in New Delhi, India**

**A paper presented at the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium, New Delhi, November 11<sup>th</sup> 2014**

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## Introduction

Schools are seen as crucial sites in which young people 'learn' gender, both directly and indirectly. Nayak & Kehilly (2008) have argued that schools are 'one of the most formative arenas in which young people experience and contribute to the (re)production of social norms', including those relating to gender and sexuality. Meanwhile, last year, the Justice Verma Commission called for schools to 'act as counter-socialisers to tackle gender bias and discrimination' (Verma et al 2013).

My PhD research focuses on young people's experiences of and attitudes towards gender and sexuality in Delhi secondary schools. A key rationale for my study is that in order to understand how schools might be able to act as 'counter-socializing' forces, it is important to first explore how young people learn about gender and sexuality in schools, and then consider how these processes of learning might inhibit or contribute to transformative action in schools.

This paper focuses on the ways in which boys negotiated masculinities and learned to 'become men' in their everyday lives at school. The paper starts with the conceptual framework for the study, followed by a brief outline of the research methods adopted. After this, findings related to masculinities are discussed in three main areas: how schools act as agents in reproducing masculinities; how students themselves are agents in producing and reproducing masculinities at schools; and other sites of learning which contribute to boys' understandings of 'being a man'. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are offered based on these findings.

## Conceptual framework

Srivastava (2013) has noted that schools are important sites where 'masculine cultures are both produced and refined', and Connell (2000) explains that a 'site' can be understood in two ways. Firstly, they can be understood as an institutional *agent* of the masculinizing process; to understand this, we must 'explore the structures and practices by which the school forms masculinities among its pupils' (2000: 151-2). Secondly, sites can be understood as the *setting* in which other agencies are in play – for example, the agencies of students themselves. Exploring peer cultures and the ways in which students respond to the masculinizing practices 'offered' by schools are ways in which we can understand these agencies. This framework is key to the way in which I conceptualise the process of learning about gender and sexuality in schools in this study – on the one hand, considering how this is encouraged by institutional school structures, and on the other, how students' agencies shape this process.

In addition to Connell's (2000) framework, the work of Indian feminist scholars such as Leela Dube (2001) and Uma Chakravarti (2003) has guided a focus on intersections of gender, sexuality, caste and class in the study. Additionally, Ritty Lukose (2009) and Sanjay Srivastava (2003)'s emphasis on exploring gender and youth within the context of globalized India has also been important when developing my theoretical approach to researching gender and sexuality in Delhi schools.

## Methods

During the main period of fieldwork in 2013, I spent five months carrying out mixed methods research with Class 11 girls, boys and their teachers in three Delhi secondary schools; a private school, a central government school and a state government school. Class 11 is the penultimate year of higher secondary education in the Indian system, and students were aged 15 – 17 years old.

Data collection began with 176 students across the three schools completing questionnaires; students who completed questionnaires could then volunteer to participate in the next phase of the study. This involved 34 students participating in mixed and single-sex focus group discussions (FGDs), and 30 of these students were then interviewed individually. A male research assistant carried out single-sex FGDs and individual interviews with the boys who participated in the study, as it was felt that this would help them to feel more comfortable when discussing issues relating to gender and sexuality; mixed focus group discussions were carried out by both of us, while I conducted single-sex FGDs and individual interviews with the girls. A total of 25 teachers were interviewed across the three schools, and ethnographic methods were also adopted during the study. This involved formal classroom observations, informal interactions and participant observation with students and teachers, and reflections and fieldnotes on the general experience of 'being here', living and working in Delhi.

All schools and participants have been anonymised in the interests of confidentiality; most of the students chose their own pseudonyms, as I think will be apparent from some of their names.

## Findings

### *Schools as institutional agents*

One of the most notable ways in which the schools as institutions reinforced assumptions about masculinities was through disciplinary practices, which were differentiated according to gender. Several students said that if girls and boys both did something wrong – for example, not completing a homework task on time – only the boys were punished, and not the girls. In particular, many students talked about teachers using physical means of punishment such as beating and slapping when disciplining boys, which they hardly ever did when disciplining girls. The predominant use of corporal punishment for boys was apparent at all the schools, even though officially, corporal punishment practices are illegal in India. Perhaps even more striking than the prevalence of these practices was the widespread acceptance of corporal punishment for boys as entirely appropriate, as reflected in the following quotation from one of the girls at the state government school:

Ma'am, it's alright. Boys do not even cry when they get slapped. It's okay for them, it's a regular thing for them. They even get slapped at home, and they get slapped at school too, so this is not at all bad for them.

(Rani – state government school)

The widespread practice and acceptance of physical punishments for boys provides an example of the schools actively reinforcing associations between masculinity and violence. The schools' gendered approach to discipline clearly influenced students' own attitudes as well, with girls and boys alike expressing the idea that boys are not only capable of 'taking' physical punishment, but that this is an appropriate and fair approach to disciplining them.

### ***Students as agents at school***

Schools can also be seen as settings in which other agencies are in play, and in particular, as settings where students are agents who produce and reproduce masculine norms. In the following quotation, a boy from the central government school describes one of his friends:

*No-one can forget his name, never ever. Even someone from 12<sup>th</sup> class couldn't touch him. He was a strong guy. He was involved in fights. He was, he was something else. Nobody was able to touch him. When he was in 10<sup>th</sup>, he was having a relationship with a girl in 12<sup>th</sup>, she was the head girl of the school.*

(Rapper – central government school)<sup>1</sup>

Rapper elevates his friend to almost mythic proportions here; in particular, the combination of being a fighter and a lover seemed to combine to form an idealised masculine identity which elevated his friend above all others.

Boys who enacted this form of idealised masculinity were often referred to as 'heroes' – either disparagingly by teachers, or admiringly by their peers. This hero masculinity draws on particular forms which are portrayed, for example, in Bollywood movies. The combination of fighting and pursuing (heterosexual) romances particularly reminded me of the slogan from last year's movie *R...Rajkumar*, in which the hero declares that there are only two things that matter in his life: 'pyaar, pyaar, pyaar', and 'maar, maar, maar' – essentially, loving and fighting.

The importance of fighting to this hero identity suggests that associations between violence and masculinity were important in peer cultures as well as the institutional practices of the school. However, it was also apparent that some boys were unwillingly involved in fights with their peers. Tornado, a soft-spoken class monitor at the private school, said that he didn't like fighting, but sometimes had to get involved if his peers provoked him. Tornado's 'good boy' masculinity was distinct from the hero masculine identity; being a good boy at school was associated with focusing on studies, paying attention in class and respecting girls and women.



According to both girls and boys, good boys displayed this respect for girls and women by not behaving in overtly sexual ways; as a result, many girls said that they felt more comfortable talking to these boys. By contrast, heroes were apparently mistrusted by the majority of the girls because they flirted with and 'passed comments' at, or verbally harassed, girls. Girls who tolerated or were seen to encourage this behaviour from heroes were notably framed as 'bad' girls for their interest in such boys.

There was evidently a conflict between the masculine identities developed and valued within peer cultures at school, and those encouraged by the institutional practices of the schools. Good boys (who enacted forms of masculinity compliant with the schools' academic and disciplinary structures) were rewarded

<sup>1</sup> Data translated from Hindi to English is presented in italic font.

through school prizes, or class monitor and school prefect positions. Meanwhile, boys who enacted hero masculinities were punished for being disruptive in class, for harassing girls, or when physical fights got out of hand. However, a 'boys will be boys' attitude seemed to prevail in the schools, and the sense that most boys would inevitably behave in these ways meant that their violent behaviour often went unchecked. Moreover, by resorting to physical means when punishing these boys, schools largely reinforced dominant assumptions that masculinity and violence are inextricably linked.

### ***Other sites of learning***

Other sites of learning also influenced participants' ideas about masculinities. The role of Bollywood tropes in young men's lives was alluded to in the previous section, with the idealisation of hyper-masculine identities in peer cultures at the schools, and other forms of media also played an important role in the making of men among participants.



Following the rape and death of a young woman in Delhi in December 2012, there has been widespread media coverage of cases of violence against women in India. In light of this coverage, it was perhaps inevitable that sexual violence and rape were topics discussed by students who participated in the research. In the mixed group discussions, I used images (left) that I found online to guide discussions about 'eve-teasing' and sexual harassment. In one of these group discussions, a boy at the state government school questioned why these images showed scenes from India, and not other countries.

*Why India has been shown here, why doesn't it show foreigners? You are in India, you have come to see that there are rapists here, what's spread in society here, rape-rape is everywhere - those two-three cases that happened, they got a lot of publicity.*

(Rajender, state government school)

The way in which Rajender questioned the research here is particularly striking. In the national and international media coverage of the December 2012 rape case (and subsequent cases), rape was problematically portrayed as an 'Indian' problem, with much debate as to why this might be the case. Rajender's objection to my choice of pictures portraying sexual harassment within an Indian context may suggest a defensive reaction to the implication, which had been so prevalent in the media, that sexual violence is in fact an 'Indian' problem. Moreover, his questioning of why I (as a Westernized Indian woman) had chosen images of Indian women being harassed by Indian men may also reflect an objection to implied assumptions about his own positionality as a young Indian man.

There are several similar examples from the research which reflect the difficulties that boys faced when attempting to define their own masculine identities in the shadow of widespread media coverage which

reproduced negative gender binaries – namely, portraying men as sexual predators, and women as inevitable victims. Perhaps unsurprisingly, ‘good boys’ openly distanced themselves from these negative masculine identities. However, it was apparent that boys who enacted the sexual confidence of ‘heroes’ also struggled with assumptions about masculine sexuality and sexual violence. One of the boys at the private school who fit the rebellious hero image (and notably, the only participant who admitted to being sexually experienced) expressed annoyance at the perception that, in his words, ‘anyone who is interested in sex is treated like a criminal’. This suggests a struggle to define a positive masculine sexuality in light of dominant media narratives about sexual violence.

## Conclusions

The findings discussed in this paper reflect some of the complexities of learning to ‘be a man’ at school, with competing lessons offered by school structures and peer cultures, as well as the media imagery which permeates young people’s lives, and so the school space.

The link between violence and young men’s masculinities is particularly complex; for example, there were those at school who openly celebrated and others who unwillingly participated in violent peer cultures. The schools themselves directly reproduced assumptions about masculinity and violence through disciplinary practices, and indirectly by viewing fights among boys as ‘natural’. Additionally, it was apparent that boys were struggling to distance themselves from portrayals of male sexual violence in ongoing media coverage, and to define a positive masculine sexual identity in light of these men-as-predator discourses.

Perhaps most problematically, the schools in which I worked were not providing a space for students to talk about gender and sexuality, let alone to critique widespread assumptions and norms. I think this lack of critical space intensified these confusions, assumed binaries and struggles with masculine identities. In order to act as counter-socialising spaces, schools should enable young people to question and debate these issues.

This could be done, for example, through class debates, or activities that encourage students to think about why certain types of behaviour are considered ‘appropriate’ for men and women. In the private school where I worked, the school counsellor had started running sex education workshops for Class 9 and Class 10 students – activities and debates like this could also be included in such workshops. If state government and central government schools similarly had a dedicated pastoral staff member working in this area, it would avoid creating additional responsibilities for teachers who are already over-burdened with teaching and administrative work.

However, teachers are still implicated in the reproduction of social norms within the school, and teacher training should include issues such as adopting an equal approach to disciplining girls and boys, and practical approaches to setting the same standards of behaviour for all students regardless of gender. Changing institutional practices at schools in these ways could encourage young men to question and challenge the restrictive masculinities of their peer cultures, and those portrayed in the media.

While back in Delhi in November 2014, I am visiting the schools where I worked last year, and presenting some of these recommendations to principals, teachers and students. By doing this, I hope to gain their responses to emerging findings, to learn whether they think such interventions could work in their schools, and to find out what else they think they could realistically be done in order to help their schools to become ‘counter-socialising spaces’ when it comes to gender and sexuality.

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